

## Preserving culinary heritage through sustainable tourism: Voices of local communities

### Očuvanje kulinarskog nasleđa kroz održivi turizam: Glas lokalnih zajednica

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#### Abstract

*This study explores how rural communities in Serbia preserve culinary heritage through sustainable tourism, focusing on the lived experiences of residents in Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with local cooks, farmers, cultural organizers, and hospitality providers, the research examines the intergenerational transmission of food knowledge, community involvement in tourism, and the perceived impacts of tourism on cultural identity. Findings reveal that traditional food practices serve as a vital form of intangible heritage, sustained through embodied learning and storytelling. While tourism offers opportunities for cultural revival and economic development, participants also express concerns about authenticity and commodification. The study highlights the importance of community-led, culturally grounded approaches to heritage preservation, particularly in multiethnic rural settings. It contributes to broader debates on intangible heritage, authenticity, and sustainable development, offering practical insights for inclusive and resilient tourism planning.*

**Keywords:** culinary heritage, sustainable tourism, rural communities, knowledge transmission, authenticity

#### Sažetak

*Ova studija istražuje kako ruralne zajednice u Srbiji čuvaju kulinarsko nasleđe kroz održivi turizam, fokusirajući se na proživljena iskustva stanovnika Erdevika, Belog Blata i Turije. Oslanjajući se na polustrukturisane intervju sa lokalnim kuvarima, farmerima, kulturnim organizatorima i ugostiteljima, istraživanje ispituje međugeneracijski prenos znanja o hrani, uključenost zajednice u turizam i percipirane uticaje turizma na kulturni identitet. Rezultati otkrivaju da tradicionalna ishrana služi kao vitalni oblik nematerijalne baštine, koja se održava kroz otelotvoreno učenje i pripovedanje. Dok turizam nudi mogućnosti za kulturni preporod i ekonomski razvoj, učesnici takođe izražavaju zabrinutost u pogledu autentičnosti i komodifikacije. Studija naglašava važnost kulturološki utemeljenih pristupa očuvanju nasleđa, posebno u multietničkom ruralnom okruženju. Takođe, doprinosi širim debatama o nematerijalnom nasleđu, autentičnosti i održivom razvoju, nudeći praktične uvide za inkluzivno i otporno planiranje turizma.*

**Ključne reči:** kulinarsko nasleđe, održivi turizam, ruralne zajednice, prenošenje znanja, autentičnost

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, food has emerged as a powerful medium through which communities express cultural identity, sustain local economies, and foster tourism development. Across Europe and beyond, rural regions are increasingly recognizing the value of their gastronomic traditions as both tangible and intangible heritage (Del Soldato et al., 2024; Rivza et al., 2022). Culinary practices, often passed

down informally through generations, are not only central to daily life but also serve as a living archive of local history, values, and social bonds (Parveen, 2016). In this context, sustainable tourism presents an important opportunity to revitalize traditional foodways, promote community resilience, and create culturally meaningful experiences for visitors. Within Serbia, rural areas possess a rich and diverse culinary heritage shaped by centuries of agricultural life, ethnic coexistence, and regional

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specificity. However, these traditions are increasingly threatened by modernization, demographic decline, and the homogenization of food culture (Grubor et al., 2022; Vuksanović et al., 2024). While national and regional tourism strategies have begun to emphasize local products and experiences, there is a lack of in-depth, community-based research exploring how rural residents themselves perceive and engage with culinary heritage in the context of tourism.

The current state of the field reveals growing interest in the intersection of food, culture, and tourism, with studies highlighting the potential of gastronomy to promote regional branding, rural development, and cultural sustainability (Lee et al., 2015; Barbora, 2022). Yet, much of this literature remains focused on consumer perspectives or macro-level strategies, with fewer studies delving into the grassroots level—specifically, how local people experience, transmit, and adapt their culinary traditions in relation to tourism development (Giampiccoli et al., 2012; Dominik, 2020; Sidali et al., 2015). Moreover, the voices of smaller, multi-ethnic rural communities in Southeast Europe remain underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how residents of three Serbian villages—Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija—understand and practice culinary heritage within the framework of sustainable tourism. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local cooks, farmers, hospitality providers, cultural organizers, and municipal representatives, this research sheds light on the embodied knowledge, intergenerational transmission, and community engagement that sustain traditional foodways.

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of local communities in preserving culinary heritage in the context of sustainable tourism, with attention to how knowledge is passed down, how traditions are adapted for tourists, and how tourism impacts cultural identity and community cohesion. By centering the lived experiences and perspectives of rural residents, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of food heritage as a dynamic cultural practice and highlights the importance of community-led approaches to tourism development. Ultimately, this paper offers empirical evidence from rural Serbia that enriches broader discussions on intangible heritage preservation, sustainable tourism, and cultural resilience. It aims to inform both scholarly debate and practical strategies for integrating culinary heritage into tourism in a way that is authentic, inclusive, and locally grounded.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The intersection of culinary heritage and sustainable tourism has attracted growing academic interest over the past two decades, with scholars recognizing food not only as a marker of identity but also as a tool for economic revitalization and cultural preservation (Nagina et al., 2025; Filipiak-Florkiewicz et al., 2022; Matta, 2019). Culinary traditions are increasingly viewed as a form of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), aligning with UNESCO's definition that highlights knowledge and

practices transmitted across generations. As Janhonen et al. (2018) argue, food carries symbolic value that extends beyond nourishment, serving as a medium through which communities express their identity and assert cultural continuity in the face of globalization. In rural contexts, these traditions are often embodied, informal, and rooted in family life—learned through observation and repetition rather than formal instruction (Li et al., 2023). Studies by Das et al. (2021) and Belahsen et al. (2018) have further emphasized the gendered dimensions of culinary knowledge, noting the pivotal role of women, particularly grandmothers and mothers, in transmitting cultural food practices within households. Despite this recognition, much of the existing literature on food tourism tends to privilege consumer experiences, destination branding, and macro-level development strategies. As Park et al. (2022) and Sosa et al. (2021) point out, there remains a lack of research into how local communities themselves engage with, reinterpret, or resist tourism-oriented representations of their food culture. In this regard, community-based tourism (CBT) provides a valuable conceptual lens. Grounded in principles of local empowerment and sustainability, CBT emphasizes the importance of grassroots participation in tourism planning and benefit-sharing (Snyman et al., 2023; Snyman et al., 2021). However, while CBT has been applied in various cultural and ecological contexts, relatively few studies have explored how it intersects with culinary heritage specifically—particularly in Southeast Europe, where rural traditions are both rich and underrepresented in global tourism narratives (Giampiccoli et al., 2012; Sosa et al., 2021; Mahfud et al., 2018).

A significant strand of literature in food heritage studies also emphasizes the embodied and affective dimensions of culinary knowledge. Scholars such as Stone et al. (2017) and Lee (2023) argue that cooking is not merely a technical act, but one that engages memory, emotion, and sensory experience. The act of preparing traditional dishes—especially in domestic settings—serves as a conduit for transmitting values, ethics, and social norms. These embodied practices often resist standardization, relying instead on intuition, sensory cues, and intergenerational trust. Such perspectives challenge dominant models of heritage preservation that focus on documentation or institutionalization, and instead point toward the everyday, relational, and often invisible labor of cultural continuity (Lee, 2023). In this context, informal teaching methods—like watching, helping, and storytelling—play a vital role in sustaining intangible heritage (Yan et al., 2021). Our study reinforces this view, showing how knowledge transmission in Serbian villages happens not through formal instruction but through hands-on participation and deeply personal mentorship, often within female kinship lines. This aligns with and expands existing literature by providing localized, rural Eastern European examples of what scholars refer to as “cooking by feeling” or “tacit cultural transmission” (Mosko et al., 2020; Miton et al., 2022). One of the central tensions within heritage tourism is the question of authenticity. As Chhabra et al. (2003), Zhang et al. (2021) and Janković et al. (2020) argue, the commodification of cultural practices for tourist consumption often leads to the simplification or

staging of traditions, raising concerns about cultural dilution. Yet recent research has begun to move beyond binary understandings of authentic versus inauthentic, focusing instead on how communities negotiate these tensions in practice. Wasela (2023), for example, suggests that performativity can coexist with sincerity, especially when local actors retain control over how their culture is presented. This perspective is particularly relevant in post-socialist rural regions, where cultural revival often occurs alongside economic necessity (Petrović et al., 2017). In such settings, tourism can act as both a threat and a catalyst for heritage preservation.

Another important area of scholarship relevant to this study is the debate over the politics of heritage ownership and community agency in tourism contexts. Scholars such as Novoa (2022) and Soccali et al. (2020) argue that heritage is often framed by institutional narratives that exclude local voices, especially in rural or marginalized communities. As a result, decisions about what constitutes “authentic” or “valuable” heritage are frequently made by external actors—governments, NGOs, or tourism boards—without meaningful input from the communities whose practices are being represented. Community-based heritage approaches aim to counter this by placing control in the hands of local people, who define, perform, and protect their own traditions (Hollowel et al., 2009; Greer, 2011; Joshi et al., 2021). The current study contributes to this body of work by highlighting how Serbian villagers, through associations, informal teaching, and local festivals, actively shape the way their culinary heritage is shared with outsiders. The focus on bottom-up preservation strategies (Ruiz Pulpon et al., 2020), such as women’s cooperatives or intergenerational food events, demonstrates that heritage can be actively produced—not just inherited. It also underscores the importance of equity and inclusion in tourism development, particularly in contexts where historical, economic, and cultural marginalization may otherwise silence rural voices.

Finally, emerging literature is beginning to explore the role of food in multicultural and multiethnic settings. Wenzel (2016) and Ripp et al. (2017) have shown that gastronomy can function as a site of intercultural dialogue and community cohesion, especially in regions with histories of conflict or marginalization. However, few studies have examined how culinary heritage operates within ethnically diverse villages in the Balkans, where food practices are often shared, adapted, and reinterpreted across cultural lines (Jovičić Vuković et al., 2020; Peštek et al., 2014; Luca, 2024; Vuksanović et al., 2020). This is a critical gap, given the potential of shared culinary initiatives to promote social resilience and inclusive forms of tourism. The integration of Hungarian, Slovak, and Serbian food traditions—as seen in villages like Belo Blato—offers a compelling example of how food heritage can become a platform for dialogue and coexistence. As such, this research contributes to an emerging strand of scholarship that views gastronomy not only as a cultural artifact but as a relational practice capable of shaping more inclusive rural futures.

### 3. Methodology

#### *Research design, sampling strategy and participant profiles*

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who possess in-depth knowledge and lived experience related to local culinary traditions and sustainable tourism practices in rural Serbia. The research was conducted in three villages—Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija, located in northern Serbia—chosen for their rich gastronomic heritage, ongoing community-led tourism initiatives, and unique cultural identities.

Participants included local food producers, traditional cooks, small-scale hospitality providers, cultural association members, and municipal representatives involved in tourism or cultural preservation. A total of 24 individuals were interviewed across the three locations, with 8 participants from each village. Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of participants by village and role, highlighting the diversity of local stakeholders involved in culinary heritage preservation. The selection criteria focused on individuals who are actively engaged in preserving and promoting local culinary practices and who have insight into how tourism affects their community and cultural heritage. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse representation in terms of age, gender, and roles within the community to capture a wide range of perspectives. All participants were approached through local networks, community organizations, and snowball sampling techniques. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and the anonymity of respondents has been preserved throughout the study. Of the 24 participants interviewed, 83% (n=20) were lifelong residents of their respective villages—Erdevik, Belo Blato, or Turija—while the remaining 17% (n=4) had moved to the area within the last 10 to 15 years, typically due to family or professional reasons related to agriculture or tourism. In terms of age, 22% of participants were between 28 and 40 years old, 39% were aged 41 to 60, and another 39% were over 60 years old. This distribution allowed for the inclusion of both younger generations involved in revitalization efforts and older individuals regarded as custodians of traditional culinary practices. Regarding education, 28% of participants had completed only primary education, 39% had secondary or vocational training (often related to agriculture, hospitality, or culinary arts), and 33% held higher education degrees, including in fields such as ethnology, tourism management, and rural development.

The sample thus reflects a mix of formal and experiential knowledge, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersection of culinary heritage and sustainable tourism. Participants included traditional home cooks (8), small-scale organic farmers (6), owners of rural tourism households (4), members of local cultural associations (3), and municipal or tourism board representatives (3).

**Table 1.** Distribution of participants by village and role

Role	Erdevik	Belo Blato	Turija	Total
Traditional Home Cooks	3	2	3	8
Small-Scale Organic Farmers	2	3	1	6
Rural Tourism Household Owners	1	2	1	4
Cultural Association Members	1	1	1	3
Municipal/Tourism Representatives	1	0	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>24</b>

Source: Author's calculation

### Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between June and August 2024. The interviews were designed to explore participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and roles in preserving culinary heritage within the context of sustainable tourism. This research was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving human participants. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews, either in written or verbal form depending on individual preference. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in reporting direct quotes. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. An interview guide was developed around key themes such as traditional food preparation, knowledge transmission, community involvement in tourism, and perceived impacts of tourism on local culture. Interviews were conducted in Serbian, either in participants' homes, workplaces (e.g., farms, guesthouses), or local community centers, depending on their preference. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior informed consent. In a few cases where participants were not comfortable being recorded, detailed handwritten notes were taken instead. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in the conversation, enabling participants to share personal stories and elaborate on topics of particular importance to them. To build rapport and ensure cultural sensitivity, the researchers spent time in each community before the interviews, attending local events and informally engaging with residents. This approach fostered trust and encouraged openness during the interviews. After each session, interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary for analysis. Field notes and observations were also documented to support contextual understanding.

### Data analysis

The data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach

proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated from Serbian into English. The lead researcher began the analysis with multiple readings of the transcripts to gain familiarity and generate initial codes manually, allowing for immersion in the nuances of participants' narratives and local expressions. These initial codes were created inductively and clustered into meaningful patterns based on recurring concepts related to food heritage, identity, transmission, tourism, and authenticity. NVivo 12 software was subsequently employed to support the organization, refinement, and visualization of themes. It served not only as a digital filing system but also as a tool for deeper analysis—enabling the use of features such as node matrices, word frequency queries, and hierarchical coding trees. These functions assisted in identifying thematic relationships, verifying code saturation, and illustrating conceptual links between categories. To enhance analytical rigor, a second researcher independently coded a subset of transcripts, with differences discussed and reconciled collaboratively. Field notes and community observations were triangulated with the coded data to ensure validity and contextual grounding.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the role of the researcher was not merely that of an observer but an active participant in building rapport and engaging with the communities studied. Prior to formal data collection, the primary researcher spent time in each village attending local events, informally conversing with residents, and observing community dynamics. This immersion fostered trust and allowed participants to speak more openly during interviews. While this close engagement enriched the depth of the data, it also introduced the possibility of bias, particularly in interpretation. To mitigate this, the researcher maintained reflective field notes throughout the process and discussed emerging themes with a second researcher to ensure analytical transparency. By acknowledging their positionality—as both an academic and a cultural insider to the region—the researcher sought to balance empathy with critical distance, thereby enhancing the credibility and authenticity of the findings.

In terms of reciprocity, the research was designed not only to gather data but also to offer value back to the communities involved. Many participants expressed appreciation for having their experiences and knowledge recognized and documented, particularly in a time when traditional practices are increasingly overlooked. Researchers shared preliminary findings with local stakeholders during informal meetings and village events, and printed summaries of the research will be distributed to cultural associations and municipal offices to support their own promotional and educational efforts. In some cases, participants expressed interest in using this material for grant applications or local school projects. While the academic outputs are intended for broader scholarly discourse, the team remains committed to ensuring that the insights generated can also contribute to local initiatives aimed at sustaining culinary heritage and promoting community identity.



To visually emphasize the recurring ideas and cultural expressions related to traditional food preparation, a thematic word cloud was generated based on key terms and phrases extracted from participant interviews (Figure 1). As shown in the visual, words such as “*intergenerational knowledge*,” “*local ingredients*,” and “*culinary heritage*” emerged prominently, reflecting participants’ emphasis on familial transmission, connection to place, and the cultural significance of food practices. The inclusion of specific dishes like *ajvar*, *sarma*, and *vanilice* further illustrates the deep ties between everyday culinary practices and the broader identity of the community. The word cloud highlights how participants consistently linked food with memory, tradition, and sustainability. Terms like “*clay pot cooking*” and “*cooking by feeling*” underscore the embodied and intuitive aspects of food preparation that are often resistant to written codification. The prominence of words such as “*preservation*” and “*revitalization*” also points to an active awareness among community members of the need to protect these traditions in the face of modernization and cultural homogenization. As a visual synthesis, the word cloud captures the emotional and cultural weight embedded in traditional culinary practices, reinforcing their role as more than mere sustenance—but as living heritage.

### ***Knowledge transmission: passing down heritage through hands, words, and rituals***

Across all three villages, participants described knowledge transmission as a deeply embedded and often informal process rooted in daily life. Rather than occurring through structured lessons or written instructions, culinary knowledge was passed down organically—through observation, repetition, and shared household responsibilities. This form of learning was perceived not only as practical but also as a vital means of cultural preservation and identity formation. Many older participants reflected on how they learned to cook by simply “being present” in the kitchen. One woman in her sixties from Erdevik explained: “*When I was a girl, no one sat me down and said, ‘Now I will teach you how to cook.’ You just helped. You cleaned the beans, you stirred the pot, you watched how the dough is kneaded. One day you just knew.*” She went on to emphasize that it was not just about memorizing recipes, but about internalizing techniques, rhythms, and a certain respect for the process. The knowledge was acquired slowly, over years, embedded in gestures and timing rather than formal measurements. This embodied learning was closely tied to family and especially to the role of grandmothers and mothers as cultural transmitters. In Turija, a younger participant in her thirties shared how she grew up watching her grandmother prepare food for large family gatherings: “*She didn’t talk much while cooking, but she would always let me sit next to her and watch. She’d hand me pieces of dough or let me stir. Only later I understood that this was her way of teaching me. Now I do the same with my daughter.*” A younger participant in her early twenties from Belo Blato reflected on how she began documenting her grandmother’s recipes through short videos shared on social media: “*I started filming my*

*grandma when she makes ajvar or strudels—not for likes, but so I don’t forget. And my friends actually asked for more videos. It’s our way of remembering and keeping it alive.*” She emphasized that while she did not initially view these recordings as cultural preservation, she later realized that they served as a valuable archive and a bridge between generations. This example illustrates how younger community members are adapting traditional knowledge transmission to contemporary digital formats, helping ensure its survival in more accessible and relatable ways.

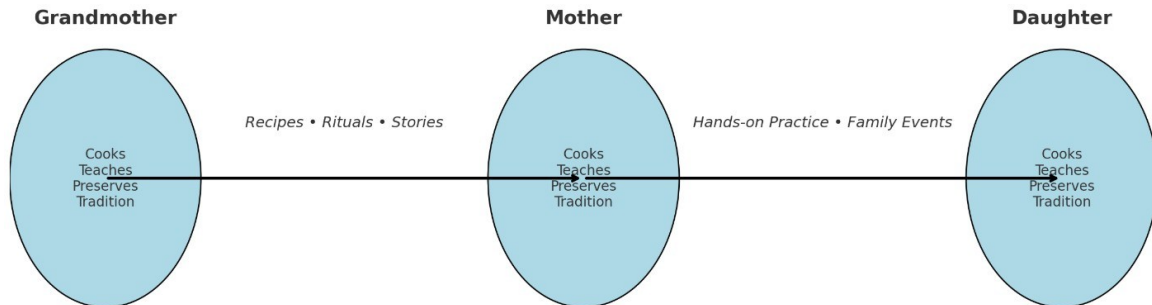
This quiet but intentional act of inclusion was described by several participants as a form of unspoken mentorship—where the kitchen became a site of intergenerational bonding, learning, and identity shaping. In addition to hands-on practice, storytelling also emerged as an important tool in knowledge transmission. Participants often recounted how family stories were shared during the preparation of food—tales of past hardships, harvests, or festive celebrations. These narratives helped to situate culinary practices within a broader cultural and historical context. A farmer from Belo Blato recounted: “*While making sarma for the slava, my mother would tell us stories about her childhood winters. How they had nothing, but they always had food made with care. That’s how we learned—through stories, through moments.*” Such storytelling reinforced values such as resourcefulness, gratitude, and community, embedding the act of cooking within a lineage of resilience and meaning. However, concerns were raised about the fragility of this transmission process in the face of changing lifestyles. Several participants noted that younger generations often lack the time, interest, or proximity to learn in the same way. In response, some communities have begun to adapt by formalizing traditional knowledge through cooking workshops or community events. In Belo Blato, for instance, a women’s association organizes seasonal cooking days where older women demonstrate techniques and explain the cultural background of each dish. As one organizer shared: “*We realized we can’t assume young people will just pick it up anymore. So now we invite them—we make it an event. We cook together, we explain. And they’re actually interested when they understand the meaning behind it.*” These adaptive strategies suggest that while the traditional modes of transmission are changing, the value placed on culinary heritage remains strong. The process of passing down knowledge continues—now blending oral, embodied, and increasingly organized forms of learning—to ensure that local food practices remain alive and meaningful in the hands of future generations.

The generational flow of culinary knowledge, as described by participants, is illustrated in the Figure 2, showing how skills, values, and traditions are passed down through family lines, particularly from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. The figure illustrates the intergenerational transfer of culinary knowledge within rural communities, as described by participants in Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija. It highlights the traditional flow of knowledge from grandmothers to mothers and then to daughters,

emphasizing how skills, values, and cultural meanings are passed down through everyday practice. Participants described this process as deeply experiential, relying on observation, repetition, and shared domestic responsibilities rather than formal instruction. Each generation plays a vital role not only in preserving specific recipes and techniques but also in transmitting the broader

cultural significance of traditional food preparation. The arrows represent the continuity of this flow, with key elements such as *rituals*, *recipes*, *stories*, and *family events* reinforcing the learning process. This visualization underscores the familial and embodied nature of culinary heritage, as well as the fragility of this transmission in the face of modernization.

**Figure 2.** Generational flow of culinary knowledge



Source: Authors

### **Community involvement in tourism**

Community involvement in tourism emerged as a dynamic and multifaceted theme across the three study sites. Participants generally viewed tourism as an opportunity to showcase local heritage, generate income, and strengthen community pride. However, their responses also revealed a delicate balancing act between economic benefit and the preservation of cultural authenticity. In all three villages, residents emphasized that tourism had become more present in recent years, largely through organized events such as food festivals, craft fairs, and religious celebrations. These events served as both economic and cultural platforms. A woman from Turija, who actively participates in the village's annual *Kobasicijada* (sausage festival), reflected: "For many of us, tourism started with the festival. It brings in people from all over, and we get to show what we do best. But it's not just about selling—it's about showing who we are." She went on to explain how local families prepare traditional dishes, perform folk dances, and tell stories about the origins of the recipes. These performances are often as much for community members as they are for visitors, reinforcing local identity while inviting outsiders in. A recurring idea was that tourism had the potential to revalorize local traditions, especially among the younger generation. Several participants mentioned that young people, who once viewed rural life as outdated, were beginning to see it differently through the lens of tourism. One man from Erdevik explained: "My son used to be ashamed of our village food. Now he helps me prepare it for tourists. He sees that people appreciate what we have here." Several younger participants also pointed to school-based initiatives and local NGO programs that encouraged them to explore culinary heritage. A high school student from Turija noted: "Last year, we had a heritage project at school where we had to interview our

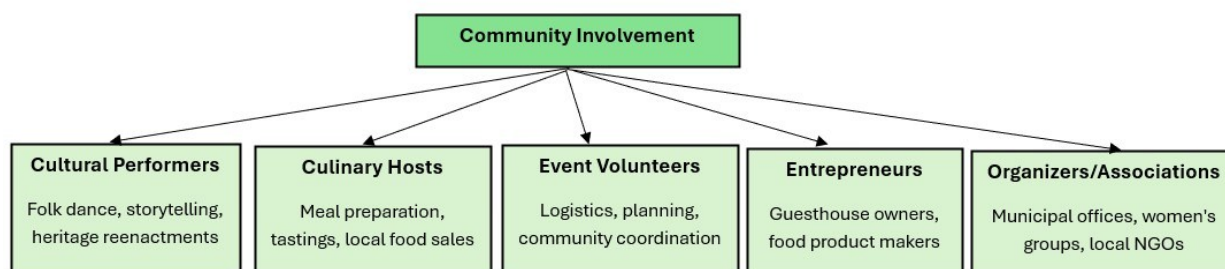
grandparents and make a presentation. It made me ask questions I never thought about before—and now I cook with my mom more often." Such examples demonstrate that formal education and community programs can work in tandem to awaken youth interest in food traditions, while fostering pride in their cultural background. These efforts were described as motivating young people to see their local knowledge not as outdated, but as something worth learning, documenting, and even sharing online.

This kind of engagement was seen as key not only to preserving culinary practices but also to fostering a renewed sense of pride in rural living. However, participants also voiced concerns about the risk of commercialization and the superficial portrayal of culture. In Belo Blato, a member of a local cultural association shared a cautionary view: "Sometimes it feels like we're putting on a show. There's a danger that what we present to tourists becomes too polished, too 'for the camera.' We have to be careful not to lose what makes it real." This sentiment reflects a broader tension—how to open up local traditions to tourism without distorting or diluting their meaning. The level of involvement in tourism varied by individual and village. Some participants were directly engaged in rural tourism enterprises—offering homemade meals, hosting cooking demonstrations, or renting out rooms—while others supported tourism through volunteer work or participation in cultural programming. A few expressed hesitations, noting that while tourism offers financial possibilities, not everyone in the community is equally positioned to benefit. As one older farmer noted: "Not all of us have the means or energy to welcome tourists. Some of us just want to live quietly, like before." This quote highlights the importance of inclusivity and respect for differing levels of willingness to participate. Despite these differing perspectives, there was a shared belief that tourism, when approached thoughtfully and collaboratively, could support the preservation of culinary

heritage and community vitality. In several cases, local associations, women's cooperatives, and municipal initiatives were cited as important mediators—helping to organize events, apply for funding, and provide logistical

support. As one participant in Belo Blato put it: *“When we work together, it’s better. No one feels alone, and we can keep our traditions alive while making something for the future.”*

**Figure 3.** Forms of community involvement in tourism



Source: Authors

In sum, community involvement in tourism is seen not merely as a source of income, but as a platform for self-expression, cultural affirmation, and social cohesion. While challenges exist, particularly around authenticity and equitable participation, many residents are finding creative and collaborative ways to integrate tourism into the fabric of everyday village life. Figure 3 illustrates the various forms of community involvement in tourism as described by participants across the three villages. These include roles such as cultural performers, culinary hosts, event volunteers, local entrepreneurs, and organizers or members of associations. Each category reflects a different way in which residents contribute to the promotion of local heritage and the functioning of tourism-related events or services. This visual representation highlights the diverse and collaborative nature of tourism in rural communities, where individuals engage at multiple levels—some by showcasing traditional food and crafts, others by facilitating logistics or offering accommodations. The central role of community involvement serves as the connecting point for these contributions, emphasizing that sustainable tourism is most successful when it is rooted in local participation, shared values, and cooperative effort.

### ***Perceived impacts of tourism on local culture***

Participants across all three villages expressed a range of perceptions regarding how tourism has affected their local culture, particularly culinary traditions. For many, tourism was seen as a positive force—helping to revitalize interest in forgotten recipes, promote pride in local identity, and create new opportunities for cultural exchange. At the same time, concerns were raised about the risks of cultural dilution, performativity, and uneven representation of traditions. One of the most commonly cited benefits was the renewed appreciation for local heritage that tourism seemed to inspire, especially among younger generations. A woman from Turija explained: *“Before, no one paid attention to how we make sausages or what stories go with them. But when tourists started coming, we had to explain it—and that made us remember why it mattered.”* Her reflection suggests that tourism serves not only as a platform for sharing culture with outsiders but also as a

catalyst for self-reflection and internal cultural reinforcement. Several participants noted that preparations for festivals or guest visits encouraged families to revisit old recipes and customs that had faded from everyday use. Participants also recognized tourism's role in economic and cultural sustainability. In Belo Blato, a middle-aged participant involved in a multicultural cooking initiative commented: *“Tourism gave us a reason to gather again—not just to cook, but to cook together, as Hungarians, Slovaks, and Serbs. It reminds us that diversity is part of who we are.”*

This quote highlights how tourism, when inclusive, can reinforce both cultural pride and interethnic harmony, particularly in communities with mixed heritage. However, the responses were not uniformly positive. A recurring concern was the commodification of tradition—the fear that cultural elements might be altered or simplified to meet tourist expectations. In Erdevik, an elderly resident noted: *“Some people now add things to recipes just because they think it will sell better. It’s not how we used to make it. It’s becoming more business than tradition.”* This perception reflects the tension between economic opportunity and cultural authenticity, where the line between adaptation and distortion is not always clear. Another concern was the uneven visibility of certain traditions over others. Some participants observed that more “spectacular” or well-known aspects of culture—such as folk dances or meat-based dishes—tend to dominate public-facing tourism events, while quieter, everyday practices or minority voices may be overlooked. As one woman in Belo Blato shared: *“People love the performances and the food stalls, but no one asks about the small things—how we dry herbs, or what we cook on normal days. That’s also our culture.”*

Despite these concerns, most participants agreed that the positive impacts of tourism outweighed the risks, provided that the process remained community-led and grounded in local values. Tourism was described as most effective and respectful when it encouraged dialogue rather than spectacle. One participant from Turija summed it up aptly: *“Tourism works best when visitors come to learn, not just to watch. When they sit with us, eat with us, and ask questions—that’s when it feels real.”* In summary,

tourism was perceived as a double-edged influence on local culture—capable of fostering preservation, pride, and participation, but also carrying risks of superficiality and imbalance. The way tourism is practiced—whether it is extractive or reciprocal—was seen as the key factor in shaping its cultural impact.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the vital role that local communities play in preserving culinary heritage through sustainable tourism practices in rural Serbia. These results align with a growing body of literature that positions food as both a cultural asset and a vehicle for community empowerment (Matta, 2019; Nagina et al., 2025; Giampiccoli et al., 2012). Similar to previous studies conducted in Mediterranean and Eastern European rural contexts, this research affirms that traditional food preparation is not merely a utilitarian act but a deeply symbolic and identity-forming practice (Del Soldato et al., 2024; Barбора, 2022). A key similarity with prior studies is the emphasis on intergenerational knowledge transfer as a cornerstone of culinary heritage preservation (Janhonen et al., 2018; Das et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023). As in this study, others have found that culinary skills are primarily passed down informally through observation and participation within family settings. The role of grandmothers and mothers as custodians of culinary knowledge has been widely acknowledged, particularly in patriarchal rural communities where domestic knowledge remains gendered (Belahsen et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2021). However, a notable difference observed in this research is the growing involvement of younger men in culinary practices, especially within tourism-oriented family businesses. This suggests a slow but meaningful shift in traditional gender roles, likely influenced by the commercialization of gastronomy through rural tourism and changing cultural expectations (Petrović et al., 2018; Kalenjuck Pivarski et al., 2022; Kalenjuck Pivarski et al., 2023; Obradović et al., 2023).

The results also resonate with studies highlighting the use of tourism as a platform for cultural revival and economic development (Lee et al., 2015; Sosa et al., 2021). Participants in Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija viewed tourism not just as an income-generating activity but as an opportunity for cultural affirmation. Similar findings have been reported in rural Spain and Italy, where food festivals and local markets serve as mediums for reinforcing cultural pride while engaging tourists (Filipiak-Florkiewicz et al., 2022; Rivza et al., 2022). However, a key distinction lies in the strong concern among Serbian participants about the commodification of tradition, which echoes debates in heritage tourism about authenticity versus performativity (Chhabra et al., 2003; Zhang et al., 2021; Wasela, 2023). While similar tensions are noted globally, this study provides rich, localized insight into how residents themselves articulate the fine line between adaptation and distortion of cultural practices. Unlike some studies that report tourism initiatives being externally driven (e.g., by government or NGOs), the Serbian case shows community-led efforts as central to tourism development. This bottom-up approach enhances

local ownership, which is crucial for long-term sustainability—a point emphasized in the literature on community-based tourism (Snyman et al., 2021; Ruiz Pulpón et al., 2020). The active roles of women's associations, local cooperatives, and municipal actors reflect a collaborative ethos that has been less visible in studies from regions where tourism planning is more top-down. Another contribution of this study is its attention to ethnic and cultural pluralism, particularly in places like Belo Blato, where multicultural culinary initiatives bring together Hungarian, Slovak, and Serbian traditions. While food has often been discussed as a marker of national or regional identity, its role in fostering interethnic harmony is less frequently explored. This finding complements emerging literature on the integrative function of food in multicultural societies (Wenzel, 2016; Ripp et al., 2018; Peštek et al., 2014; Paunić et al., 2024) and adds a unique perspective from the post-socialist Balkans, where ethnic relations carry complex historical weight.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers aiming to harness culinary heritage as a tool for sustainable rural development. First, the research underscores the importance of supporting community-led tourism initiatives, where local residents—not external actors—drive the preservation and promotion of cultural practices. This calls for targeted support from municipalities and regional development agencies in the form of funding, infrastructure, and training programs that strengthen grassroots organizations such as women's associations and local cooperatives. Furthermore, the observed decline in traditional knowledge transmission highlights a need to introduce intergenerational culinary education programs, particularly for youth. These can take the form of workshops, school partnerships, or mentorship schemes that teach not only recipes but also the cultural narratives and values embedded in food practices. Additionally, the study points to the potential of tourism to foster intercultural understanding in ethnically diverse communities, such as Belo Blato. Practical efforts should focus on designing inclusive gastronomic experiences that celebrate multicultural traditions, thereby promoting social cohesion while offering unique attractions for visitors. To safeguard cultural authenticity and avoid the pitfalls of commercialization, there is a need for co-created guidelines that ensure respectful representation of local customs during festivals, cooking demonstrations, and food tours. Local tourism boards and community stakeholders should work collaboratively to balance economic goals with cultural integrity. Support for small-scale agri-tourism ventures also emerged as a key implication. Many participants are already engaged in farming and hospitality, and with proper capacity building—particularly in hospitality management, digital marketing, and guest services—they could expand their offerings sustainably. Simplified regulations and micro-financing could facilitate these initiatives. Lastly, the reliance on oral transmission of culinary knowledge highlights the importance of cultural mapping and documentation. Local governments, NGOs, or academic institutions could facilitate the recording of traditional recipes, techniques, and stories through participatory

methods, ensuring that this intangible heritage is preserved for future generations and can be integrated into tourism promotion and education materials.

While this study highlights the centrality of grassroots efforts in preserving culinary heritage, it also recognizes the important—though sometimes understated—role of local governance structures in enabling or constraining such initiatives. In all three villages studied, municipal support played a facilitative role, particularly in providing logistical assistance for events, small-scale funding for community associations, and promotional support through local tourism boards. For example, the organization of food festivals or interethnic cooking events often depended on coordination between local cultural associations and municipal departments responsible for culture or rural development. However, participants also indicated that such support was uneven and frequently dependent on the initiative of individual local officials or the availability of project-based funding. This suggests a need for more systematic and sustained collaboration between community actors and local authorities. Strengthening these governance-community linkages could enhance the continuity, scalability, and impact of heritage-based tourism initiatives. Institutionalizing mechanisms for participatory planning and resource allocation—such as village tourism councils or joint action committees—would ensure that community voices remain central while benefiting from administrative support and public infrastructure.

This study provides valuable insights into the preservation of culinary heritage through sustainable tourism in rural Serbia, but several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was geographically limited to three villages—Erdevik, Belo Blato, and Turija—which, although rich in cultural traditions, may not fully represent the diversity of rural communities across Serbia or the broader Balkan region. As such, the findings should be interpreted within the specific socio-cultural contexts of these locations and may not be generalizable to other regions with different historical, ethnic, or economic dynamics. Second, the study relied exclusively on qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews. While this approach enabled rich, in-depth exploration of lived experiences and community perspectives, it may have been influenced by participants' selective memory, personal biases, or social desirability—particularly in discussions surrounding cultural identity and tourism. Triangulating these findings with additional data sources, such as participant observation, visitor surveys, or economic impact assessments, could have further strengthened the analysis. Third, the sample size, although appropriate for qualitative research, was relatively small (24 participants) and predominantly composed of individuals already engaged in cultural preservation or tourism-related activities. This focus may have excluded more skeptical or disengaged voices, potentially limiting the range of perspectives on tourism's impacts and community involvement. For future research, several directions are recommended. Comparative studies involving multiple regions within Serbia or across neighboring countries would help explore how different

cultural, historical, or policy environments influence the relationship between culinary heritage and sustainable tourism. Longitudinal research could also be beneficial in tracking how traditions and community dynamics evolve over time in response to tourism growth, modernization, or demographic changes. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of tourists themselves—both domestic and international—could offer complementary insights into how cultural authenticity is perceived and valued by visitors, and how that perception influences community practices. Finally, more interdisciplinary approaches that integrate food studies, heritage management, tourism studies, and rural development could help bridge theoretical gaps and offer holistic strategies for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while fostering inclusive and sustainable tourism models.

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